

Eli Thayer Poses a Threat

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the 15th in a series of biographical articles on lawyer-soldier-statesman General Jenkins, who was born and brought up at Greenbottom and is buried in Spring Hill Cemetery in Houghton.)

By Congressman Ken Heckler

Onward to the Ohio River flowed the Big Sandy and the Kanawha. Three smaller and broader streams — the Guyan, the Mud and Terrible Twelve-pole-twisted and wound until they found La Belle Riviere's warm bosom.

In the great valleys coursed by these streams, settlers found fertility and prosperity. From Milledgeport to the Mason County line, Albert Gallatin Jenkins, Congressman - elect, gentleman farmer, attorney-at-law, now had both fame and fortune in his grasp in the 4,400 acres around Greenbottom.

Suddenly the peaceful summer of 1857 was hit by a double thunderbolt. The Panic of 1857, whose effects were felt mainly in the seaboard industrial centers, nevertheless slowed the development of western Virginia. A more direct and personal threat to the young Congressman - elect, Jenkins came from a Massachusetts man named Eli Thayer, who himself had just been elected to the House of Representatives.

Thayer Was A Planner

Eli Thayer was a planner with a missionary's zeal. He wanted to transplant New England's workers, mechanics, builders and tillers of the soil in a chain of colonies all the way to Kansas, using the colonists as a rallying point against the peculiar institution of slavery. One of the communities Thayer selected for colonization was Ceredo. Perhaps Thayer could be labelled the Ohio Valley's first carpetbagger!

In an article published by the New York Herald, Thayer boldly announced his "Northern

Emigrant Aid Society," capitalized at three to four million dollars to purchase "waste and wornout lands of Virginia," build factories and schools, bringing profit to the company and "at least two hundred thousand emigrants." The twin results of this project would be "the rapid development of the dormant agricultural, commercial, manufacturing and mineral resources of the state" and an impetus to the cause of free white labor which might end slavery in Virginia.

Thayer was the kind of fellow who just couldn't let go of an idea, and even the most violent opposition refused to faze him. The New England firebrand got lots of encouragement from a man named Underwood (John C.), who had been driven out of the area by his neighbors because he had attended a Republican convention.

Sets Up At Ceredo

Just about the time the voters were going to the polls to elect Jenkins to Congress, Thayer was riding the B&O to Parkersburg, whence he took a boat down the Ohio to Ashland, Ky. On May 27, after speaking in Catlettsburg, Thayer crossed over into Wayne County where he reported great enthusiasm for his idea after a public meeting there. He decided to set up at Ceredo, and he contracted for four stationary steam engines, saw mills, a grist and flour mill, wood-working factory and school and public buildings.

Thayer's idea was received by many Cabell Countians with an air of suspicion. Among the community leaders, the plan was received about the same way as would a 1961 announcement that Rev. Martin Luther King planned to set up a trailer camp in Park Hills as a launching pad for Freedom Riders.

Congress was not in session during the summer of 1857, so angry property holders flocked

to Greenbottom to protest to Congressmen - elect Jenkins. In August, Jenkins visited Ceredo and friction immediately developed between the young legislator and the zealous Thayer followers. A protest meeting was called for August 26, 1857, at the Town Hall in Guyandotte.

Jenkins Speaks Out

The meeting was called to order at 4 p. m. to enable the citizens of Guyandotte "to take into consideration Eli Thayer's emigration scheme, and express their sentiments thereon." On motion of Col. Isaac Ong, Col. John Everett was called to the chair and A. J. Keenan was chosen secretary. Although not a resident of Guyandotte, Jenkins was called on to express his opinions. "In an eloquent and masterly manner," according to the Guyandotte newspaper, the Unionist, Jenkins blistered the Thayer scheme. Although the Unionist had editorially defended Thayer when the Ceredo Plan was first advanced, the newspaper commented that Jenkins's statement was convincing to all who heard him.

Infuriated, Thayer accused Jenkins of gathering "a few

friends and relatives, with six or eight bar-room loafers" in order to try and extinguish the colony "by a set of resolutions."

The war of nerves was interrupted by the approaching session of Congress, which convened in Washington, D. C. on Dec. 7, 1857. Both Jenkins and Thayer left to be sworn in at the opening session of the 35th Congress.

Plans Go On Rocks

Meanwhile, Thayer's abortive plans gradually went on the rocks through a combination of local opposition, his own absence from the scene, the disclosure that John Brown had secured arms from Thayer for his Harper's Ferry raid, and the outbreak of the Civil War itself.

The whole Thayer episode was a painful one to Jenkins. He was deeply interested in economic development of the area, but not at the price of what

he regarded as a bare-brained scheme which had radical abolitionist overtones. Faced with the direct issue of what course he should take, Jenkins did not flinch in his duty. He did not use force, but he rallied the people of Cabell and Wayne coun-

ties to prevent the spread of Thayer's emigration plan.

Shortly after Thanksgiving time in 1857, the proud young Congressman-elect set forth on a much happier mission: to be sworn in as a full-fledged Member of the House of Represen-

tative. For Jenkins, this was a refreshing contrast to his defensive "battering the line" against Eli Thayer, now at last he was ready for positive and constructive public service to his state and nation.

(TO BE CONTINUED)